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Danielle Fosler-Lussier, *Music in America's Cold War Diplomacy*

Oakland, CA, University of California Press, 2015, 344 p.

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- 1 In August 2008, the U.S. ambassador to Paraguay, James Cason, left his post in Asunción. Ambassador Cason is not only a seasoned diplomat, however, but an amateur singer and composer. He decided to give Paraguay a special farewell gift: his own performances of songs in Guaraní, an indigenous language widely spoken in parts of Argentina, Bolivia, and Brazil and one of Paraguay's official languages. He recorded a CD (the album's title, *Campo jurado*, or "Field of Promises," is in Spanish), performed his songs for live audiences, and appeared on television, evidently to no small acclaim.
- 2 Few career diplomats have participated so directly in promoting music. Yet while Ambassador Cason's story confirms music's power, it also exposes the complex interplay of aesthetic judgment and political rhetoric that can surface when music and affairs of state mix, especially when a powerful nation seeks diplomatic relations with a weak one. Some Paraguayans appreciated Cason's gesture if not his actual voice. (Thanks to his performances, he was offered a role in a local production of *Tosca*—a non-singing one.) Other Paraguayans were irked by the crib notes Cason used for the Guaraní lyrics; nor would Guaraní speakers have been gratified had they learned that at least U.S. media outlet described their language as "obscure."¹
- 3 Anyone imagining cultural diplomacy during the Cold War likely conjures up an entirely different image than the crooning U.S. ambassador. Spy vs. Spy cartoons of *Mad* magazine fame? Top-secret heavy-handedness congruent with East-West stereotypes? After all, the

United States had just proved its military and economic power. Now it had to show superior cultural credentials, especially as the Soviet government paraded its own cultural accomplishments. The U.S. State Department quickly expanded its cultural diplomacy apparatus, initially established in 1938 to make friendly overtures to Latin America during the Good Neighbor policy. Now, with most of the world vulnerable to the Soviet threat, the State Department broadened its reach. In 1954, it established the Cultural Presentations program, soon embassies and consulates “in the field” boasted phalanxes of CAOs (Cultural Affairs Officers) and PAOs (Public Affairs Officers), all in the service of soft power, that is, the ability of a country to persuade rather than coerce, as defined by Joseph Nye.

- 4 The author of this fascinating book, Danielle Fosler-Lussier, is one of the first musicologists to probe music's role in cultural diplomacy, still a relatively new area of inquiry. Diplomatic historians have long been indifferent to culture, considering it “fuzzy” and thus unworthy of serious study. Yet as Fosler-Lussier and others have demonstrated, many a Big Question is illuminated—if not definitively resolved—when we frame it in terms of soft power. First, however, it pays to consider the purpose of cultural diplomacy. Is it the endeavor to unite diverse peoples through deeply felt experiences of art? The means by which one country promotes to other nations (or perhaps imposes upon them) its own cultural values? Such questions are especially compelling when we consider them in terms of music, in most instances a nonrepresentational art lacking explicit meaning. Still, listeners are quick to attach meaning to musical works, which may vary from one constituency or nation-state to another. In short, the adage “music is the universal language” (Longfellow, *Outre mer*, 1833) is tested whenever musicians take up cultural diplomacy.
- 5 Several models have arisen in this still new area of inquiry. Some musicologists consider ways in which certain genres, practices, or styles have meshed with cultural diplomacy's goals². Others focus on the experience of an individual musician-diplomat³. Others emphasize the target audience, analyzing local press commentary on U.S. musician-diplomats and considering the politics of a given country, especially its relations with the United States⁴. Each balances government documents, media, musical sources, scores, and recordings. The fact that no one epistemological approach has prevailed suggests a healthy and open dynamism.
- 6 Fosler-Lussier offers yet another model, one that works well. Mainly, she scrutinizes U.S. government documents, which, taken together, yield a panoramic view of the central issues in Cold War musical diplomacy. Her sensitive reading of these documents enables her to probe both the inner workings of the State Department and the view “from the field,” both of which constantly interacted. The sometimes unwieldy machine of cultural diplomacy encompassed multiple perspectives: of local audiences, foreign critics, the musicians themselves, and U.S. citizens following cultural diplomacy tours through the media. For Fosler-Lussier, media is such an important component of cultural diplomacy during this period that she assigns it an entire chapter, “Music, Media, and Cultural Relations Between the United States and the Soviet Union” (chapter 7) and returns to it in her conclusion, “Music, Mediated Diplomacy, and Globalization in the Cold War Era” (p. 205-225).
- 7 Clearly this abundance of data presents narrative and organizational challenges. Should it be arranged chronologically? By country or region? Fosler-Lussier takes a holistic approach by considering different types of music (classical, jazz, religious, popular),

although two chapters depart from this scheme, chapter 4, “African American Ambassadors Abroad and At Home” and chapter 7, mentioned above. Her solution is effective because it blends information with conceptual concerns and accommodates the occasional excursus, which often focus on individual actors. The redoubtable conductor William Strickland (p. 48-76), who in his far-flung travels made more than one trip to Vietnam, launched the Saigon Symphony Orchestra in 1959, winning praise from President Ngo Dinh Diem (p. 64). Another of Fosler-Lussier’s principals, John Finley Williamson of Westminster Choir College (p. 133-141) performed religious music abroad and managed to demonstrate more than once that Cold War cultural diplomacy was not without its gaffes.

- 8 As for conceptual issues, Fosler-Lussier invites us to reflect on what each of these types of music meant in that era. Unlike the Good Neighbor period, when U.S. and Latin American artists were sent abroad for their ability to challenge the Western European canon, Cold War cultural diplomacy reformulated the canon, seeing it in two conflicting yet compatible ways: (1) as politically neutral and (2) as a competitive terrain. Any U.S. orchestra that authoritatively handled this repertory showed that “pleasure and the intrinsic musical value were not separable from the prestige of the music and the implied compliment of attention from a superpower” (p. 45). Host nations, aware that a cultivated public was required to applaud Beethoven and Brahms, took these visits by superior U.S. orchestras as high praise. Countries that did not receive the best orchestras, however, would be miffed, as the Embassy staff in Lima, Peru learned when locals griped that “the top U.S. performers are sent to Europe and other areas and the lesser-known ones to Latin America” (p. 29). Certainly musicologists nowadays generally accept the idea that the European classical music many of us study and teach is anything but politically neutral. Its prominence in cultural diplomacy is yet one more indication that such has never been the case. Likewise, while few take seriously the notion that “music is the universal language,” the fact that during the Cold War “people the world over were hearing and liking the [European canon]” (p. 46) helps explain the enduring power of this old saw.
- 9 If the Western European canon initially dominated U.S. musical diplomacy, soon enough “the quandary of “two audiences”” arose (p. 35). Officials wondered if the classical music applauded by educated, upper-class audiences would enjoy any currency in less elite circles, including rural publics. According to Fosler-Lussier, the target audience was never actually identified. One Foreign Service officer argued that “totally unsophisticated audiences can enjoy, appreciate and benefit from excellently performed . . . chamber music” (p. 39), recalling the rhetoric of the “good music” movement in the United States during the 1920s and 30s. Prejudices surfaced as well: “You don’t send a chamber music quartet to Uganda,” Arthur Schlesinger Jr. evidently remarked (p. 39).
- 10 Enter jazz, the status of which changed both at home and abroad during the Cold War. Early jazz-related diplomacy, such as Dizzy Gillespie’s tour of 1956, perplexed many U.S. citizens, who complained in letters to the State Department that jazz lacked the heft and prestige of the classical repertory (p. 79). Clearly if jazz was to play a role in cultural diplomacy it would have to be legitimated, and many collaborated to that end. In 1955, Edward R. Murrow dedicated an episode of his television program *See It Now* to another prominent jazz diplomat, Louis Armstrong, to the point of acting as Satchmo’s straight man by asking “hopelessly square white outsider” questions such as “What’s a cat?” (p. 103). Other efforts at elevating jazz were less successful. When State Department

officials recommended that jazz musicians survey in their performances various styles in the format of an historical overview to emphasize “the seriousness of jazz as an art form” (p. 81) many players, especially those associated with certain styles, resisted. U.S. jazz musicians came to recognize how well audiences abroad understood not only jazz but the personalities that created it: as one member of Benny Goodman’s exclaimed during a 1962 tour of the Soviet Union, “these cats know more about us than we do!” (p. 190). Jazz improvisation, in which presumably every voice could be heard, proved a persuasive metaphor for U.S. democracy, as did the idea that jazz was “free speech in music” (p. 98).

- 11 Also germane to jazz’s status was the centrality of African Americans in its history and evolution, an especially sensitive matter one during the struggle for civil rights in the United States, on which, moreover, cultural diplomats were expected to opine. Some, like Benny Goodman, believed that integrated bands would speak for themselves (p. 95). Armstrong, on the other hand, declared, “the [U.S.] government can go to hell” (p. 107) after Arkansas governor Orval Faubus ordered the National Guard to prevent nine African-American students from entering the all-white Little Rock Central High School. (In those days, “hell” was a strong word.) Abroad, however, Armstrong was far more circumspect. The unfailingly courteous Marian Anderson, already on a State Department tour when Armstrong made this pronouncement, acknowledged inequality in the United States but constantly expressed hope for her people. This quiet dignity played well at home: minutes after an episode dedicated to Anderson on *See It Now* (albeit not by CBS affiliates in Montgomery, Alabama, or Columbus, Georgia), television viewers, including many from the South, hastened to write Murrow, commending him for his “good taste” in featuring Anderson, who possessed not only a “queenly” manner but served as “an example of what Americans can and should do to sell Democracy and defeat our enemies who plot the destruction of our beloved country” (p. 115).
- 12 In Chapter 5, “Presenting America’s Religious Heritage Abroad,” Fosler-Lussier relates mainline Protestant identity to cultural diplomacy. It was during the Cold War that Eisenhower established the National Prayer Breakfast and that the phrase “under God” was added to the Pledge of Allegiance. Few musical repertoires were better qualified to challenge “godless communism” than so-called Negro spirituals, religious music from the Western canon, and contemporary religious music. Fervently opposing choral singing in the United States with communist choral movements, Williamson, of Westminster Choir College, held that “America is a Christian nation, made of people who love the home, who are not interested in jazz, who are not interested in nightclubs [but]... in things of the home, the things of culture” (p. 137). To the best of my knowledge, Fosler-Lussier is the first scholar to explore mainline Protestantism in music in this light. She has certainly whetted my appetite for more research on this potent topic, still part of public life today.
- 13 In chapter 6, “The Double-Edged Diplomacy of Popular Music,” Fosler-Lussier shows how popular music departed from the lofty aims attached to classical music—but packed in much bigger audiences. After all, as one Embassy official explained, “a woodwind quintet cannot and did not make the kind of impact” that Blood, Sweat, and Tears did on its 1970 tour of Romania, Yugoslavia, and Poland (p. 164). Rock musicians, seen as “absolutely free” (p. 163), also symbolized democracy. The same could be said of folk singers, many of whom were decided leftists but believed they could somehow tread the uncertain line between “authentic” folk performance and glitz. Still, as Steve Addiss and Bill Crofut discovered after performing in Vietnam in 1964, it was impossible to avoid the impression

that their tour could be taken as anything other than support for the war, now relentlessly escalating (p. 160).

- 14 As noted, the final chapter explores media and cultural diplomacy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, setting forth the processes through which “cultural diplomacy made contact between the hostile superpowers first possible and then commonplace” (p. 200). The new medium of television suddenly offered viewers far and wide common experiences through the power of images. Yet, as with the internet, the format promised immediacy at the same time that these images seemed less than real. We might even conclude that musical diplomacy was so mediated that it amounted to a “performance of the performance.” Where does the real experience reside, and what does it mean?
- 15 Having raised this thorny question, Fosler-Lussier offers one antidote: interviews with some of the musical ambassadors. This human dimension, which surely involved hours of travel and transcription, is one of this book’s strongest features. Untrained in diplomacy, these musicians nonetheless represented the U.S. government, a role on which many look back fondly. Some read the pamphlets the State Department provided and some did not. Some engaged with local citizens and others remained onlookers. However meaningful, their accounts are susceptible to the quirks and inconsistencies of memory. Yet this very subjectivity must be part of cultural diplomacy’s story, to complement presumably objective government documents and linear histories.
- 16 Readers of this book will be regaled with a well-organized wealth of material that always makes a point. One appreciates the fact that a single sentence, such as “With the exception of the Soviet-American exchanges that were regulated by treaty, the United States sent out more musicians than it received as guests” (p. 4), involves hours of sifting through documents. Surprises such as a production of Bizet’s *Carmen* in Tagalog (p. 56) offer delight. Another attractive feature is the user-friendly website, which enables readers to enter any country into the tour database and find out which artists and ensembles went there, along with a series of useful appendices.
- 17 Throughout, the paradoxical nature of cultural diplomacy hangs in the background. Some U.S. citizens felt no need whatsoever to defend the U.S.’s reputation during the Cold War, believing that “the American taxpayers and decent citizens don’t give a hoot what any country think[s] of our way of life” (p. 108). But many more saw nuance. President Lyndon Johnson once said to a group of musicians, “Your art is not a political weapon. Yet much of what you do is profoundly political” (p. 203). In other words, musicians untrained as ambassadors were suddenly thrust into world politics with little more than printed matter from the State Department and their talent to rely on. Surely the most important question is whether the “profoundly political” message was imperialist. Fosler-Lussier proposes that when a top-down scheme prevails, according to which a powerful country directs its cultural accomplishments into the “empty vessel” of a less fortunate nation, the answer is a clear “yes.” When we look in the reverse direction, however, we behold not a hierarchy but a network of people, values, activities, economies, and agendas, a dynamic set of jostling priorities that Fosler-Lussier calls “productive tension” (p. 13). At no point should historians overlook the dangers of the top-down model. But Fosler-Lussier’s tracking of multidirectional interactions, of the constant dance between empathy and incomprehension or condescension and collaboration, goes far beyond the black-and-white stereotypes of good and evil – Spy vs. Spy – that so often obscure foreign policy. Surely Fosler-Lussier’s model and the findings it reveals will stimulate new observations for years to come.

NOTES

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Carol A. Hess teaches at the University of California, Davis. Among other honors, she has received the ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award, the American Musicological Society's and the Society for American Music's Irving Lowens Award. She is also a two-time winner of the Robert M. Stevenson Award for Outstanding Scholarship in Iberian Music. Her most recent book is *Representing the Good Neighbor: Music, Difference, and the Pan American Dream* (Oxford University Press, 2013). Twice a Fulbright Lecturer, she has taught in Spain and Argentina.